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ABSTRACT

Poetry presents serious difficulties to students. Many poems students are asked to study were written during eras with social mores, modes of thought and expression that are now unfamiliar. Often the sentiments expressed in poetry are discomforting or unfamiliar to students, though the greatest poets express universal ideas and emotions with which it should be possible for them to identify. Poems often deal with geographical or social settings alien to the students' experience. Perhaps the greatest barrier to understanding poetry, however, is its elliptical, metaphorical, and highly allusive language. There are four methods teachers can use to overcome these barriers and help their students achieve a greater interest in as well as understanding of poetry. The first method is to stress enjoyment and to teach poems at the appropriate maturation level. The second is to offer a wide range of both old and contemporary poems, but ones that are easily understood, and are relevant to the students' background, experience, or attitudes. The third method is to relate the fundamental human concerns that many poets deal with to the students' lives, and the fourth is to present poetry through media and methods that provide maximum student involvement and interest. (Author/HTH)

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BREAKING THE POETRY BARRIER: TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING AND ENJOYING POETRY

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I think that few students understand poetry at school; certainly very few enjoy it; and fewer still continue reading poetry after school or university. One reason for this is that poetry is an intellectual exercise: for most people it can never compete with the excitement of an international rugby test or Wilbur Smith's The Sound of Thunder. But a second reason is that for any reader poetry presents certain barriers to enjoyment. The four main difficulties, as I see them, are its age, its sentiments, its parochiality and its language.

Many of the poems our students study derive from previous eras: from the time of the Romantics, the Augustans, the Metaphysicals or even Chaucer, and students are rarely familiar with the norms, the thinking, or the historical and cultural background of those eras. A reading of Shakespeare's My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun, for instance, presupposes some knowledge of the conventions of Elizabethan love sonneteers; and an acquaintance with Jacobean religious conflicts would shed light on the obsessive fears found in Donne's 'divine poems'. But to appreciate fully the writings of almost any poet, we need to know something of the philosophical and stylistic aims of his time.

A second obstacle to enjoyment is often poetic sentiment. Mawkish sentiments, or paeans of nature such as the famous Daffodils or Keats' To Autumn, can be anathema to adolescents reared on Leather-Jackets, Bikes and Birds. In Collins' Ode to Evening, which was prescribed for

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Matriculants in the South African Transvaal last year - admittedly a conservative province in a not very liberated republic - the sun 'Sits in yon western tent'; the sky has 'cloudy skirts,/ With brede ethereal wove'; and the evening is prepared for its brief stay by elves who sleep in buds, and nymphs who wreathe their brows with sedge... It is true that in many countries there has been a move away from this type of poetry - one thinks of the fairly adventurous anthologies that are in circulation in Canada, for instance - but when I stood in for the Head of English in a progressive school in the UK not long ago, the 14-year-old mixed ability pupils were studying extracts from Pope's An Essay on Criticism, Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel and Milton's Areopagitica, none of them having heard of Wilfred Owen, Dylan Thomas or E E Cummings, and none having read Tom Sawyer or The Great Escape. Needless to say, they weren't very enthusiastic about English.

A third obstacle is the parochiality of some poetry. In my experience too many of the poems prescribed for study in the southern hemisphere have English settings: they speak of seasons, blossoms, vegetation or situations that differ radically from those with which our students are acquainted. 'Oh, to be in England / Now that April's there' instead of 'Oh, to be in Sydney / Now that August's here'... I imagine there might be some resistance in England to a poem entitled 'Christmas on the Beach' or 'Winter in July' (though on second thoughts, considering the English weather, perhaps there wouldn't!) or to poems eulogising dingos, dongas or didgeridoos. I agree entirely that we should be international and eclectic in our choice of literature, but when recently I asked a British publisher to bring out a new edition of a delightful children's book, Rascal by Sterling North, it was turned down on the grounds that a British child wouldn't be able to relate to the story of a boy and his pet raccoon.

The problem of parochiality is especially acute for African students. You might be interested to hear two verses from a poem set for Black students in South Africa

this year: Thomas Campion's There is a Garden in her Face:

> There is a garden in her face,
> Where roses and white lilies grow;
> A heavenly paradise is that place,
> Wherein all pleasant fruits do flow.
> There cherries grow which none may buy
> Till 'Cherry-Ripe' themselves do cry.
>
> Those cherries fairly do enclose
> Of orient pearls a double row,
> Which when her lovely laughter shows,
> They look like rosebuds filled with snow.
> Yet them nor peer nor prince can buy,
> Till 'Cherry-Ripe' themselves do cry.

Leaving aside the impossible metaphor of 'fruits that flow', I presume I'm right in saying that the 'cherries' are the young lady's lips, the 'orient pearls' her teeth, and the 'rosebuds filled with snow' her mouth plus dentures? One can imagine the confusion that could arise if the students used such terminology in everyday life. I mean, even in Africa not many dentists say 'Open your rosebuds', nor do many mothers say 'Don't forget to clean your orient pearls.' Apart from this, snow, pearls and cherries are unknown to the majority of African children.

This type of language can profitably be compared with that used in a poem entitled Handcuffs by a Black South African poet, Oswald Mtshali:

> Handcuffs
> have steel fangs
> whose bite is more painful
> than a whole battalion
> of fleas...

(Mtshali's poem, of course, isn't prescribed). This year in South Africa, despite an upsurge of Black writing on the continent, not a single poem by a Black writer has been set for African students, nor do any of the prescribed poems reflect an urban African environment.

I think we need to encourage the reading of more national poets; in Australia this might mean Bruce Dawe or the Aboriginal writer Kath Walker; in New Zealand Sam Hunt

or James K Baxter. This is not to denigrate the English tradition, but to acknowledge the validity and relevance of literary alternatives.

The fourth barrier to enjoyment concerns language, and this is a very real problem. The literature of the past is inevitably becoming more elusive as words change their meaning. But poetry presents a special problem in that its language is invariably elliptical, metaphorical and symbolic. I think many teachers fail to realise just how difficult poetry is. That's why it is encouraging to read the quotation from D W Harding that prefaces the Literature Commission of this Conference: 'As teachers,' Professor Harding writes, 'we should remember how long it takes to respond even to poems of our own choice, how often we are quite... numb to parts or wholes as we encounter literature, and not expect too much from the students. First encounters in the classroom should deliberately hold back formulation, should back away from everything that is not tentative and partial.' I think this is splendid advice. We often assume too much when teaching poetry. We assume understanding where there is little, appreciation where there is less, and identification where there is none. A poem is a highly complex piece of machinery. I wonder whether we could understand the workings of a nuclear reactor or a DNA cell without explanation? Or, if a satisfactory explanation were given, would we necessarily want to learn about these things? Yet we assume that the student ought to interest himself or herself in the self-indulgent outpourings of Shelley or the abstruse symbolism of Blake or Yeats. The very strength of poetry: its conscious structuring, its verbal refinement, its taut compound of meaning and expression, makes it less rather than more accessible to school audiences.

As an example we might consider Thom Gunn's impressive poem On the Move, which describes 'the Boys' coming along the road on motorcycles. How easily could we paraphrase the lines:

> One moves with an uncertain violence
> Under the dust thrown by a baffled sense
> Or the full thunder of approximate words...?

Yet this is by no means the most difficult statement in the poem. Figurative language such as this adds a new, refreshing, and illuminating dimension to the experience of poetry, but it increases its difficulty for classroom purposes. And it can destroy the poem if the imagery is pommelled, squeezed and mangled before being hung out to dry on the pedagogic washing-line.

Another factor that makes the language of poetry remote is its allusiveness. This is seen most acutely in the biblical and mythological references of Milton - we remember Lycidas - or the socio-political references of Dryden. Contemporary references such as to 'Some village Hampden' in Gray's Elegy or literary references such as to 'the Seven Sleepers' in Donne's The Good-Morrow, can cause problems even for the conscientious teacher. I believe that if the poem can be understood without looking up the references, then they should be ignored; but if the references are essential to understand the meaning of the poem, then notes must be consulted; yet very few anthologies incorporate notes on textual difficulties. If a poem has so many references that it is irksome to read, then it should not be studied in schools.

Assuming these are the barriers, how can they be overcome? I think first we must stress enjoyment. One of my students at the teacher-training college recently returned from supervising a class of 11-year-olds. 'They loathed poetry,' she said. 'What were they reading?' I asked. 'Dylan Thomas' The Hunchback in the Park,' she replied. 'And how was the teacher handling the poem?' I asked. 'They were doing a comprehension on it.' 'So what did you do?' 'I let them act out Two's Company (a poem by Raymond Wilson about a man who sleeps in a haunted house), and they wanted to do poetry every day with me after that.' Enjoyment is justified if only because it makes possible a genuine learning situation.

Secondly we must teach poems at the right maturation level. It is a mistake to teach a poem too early. I believe we should err on the side of easier poems rather

than take refuge in the fallacy of 'challenging the students'. What happens in practice is that we assail them with poems that are too difficult for the age-group or whose concepts are too abstruse. The few gifted children usually come through this challenge unscathed but the less gifted have their confidence undermined. There are many worthwhile lucid poems that can stimulate students at the various levels, poems like Carl Sandburg's Fog, J A Lindon's Sink Song or Patrick Barrington's I Had a Hippopotamus for 10 - 12 year olds; Wilfred Owen's Dulce et Decorum Est, Charles Causley's Timothy Winters or Peter Roche's Plug In, Turn On, Look Out for 13 - 15 year olds; and for the older age group Auden's The Unknown Citizen, Tessimond's The Man in the Bowler Hat, Kops' Shalom Bomb, Brock's Five Ways to Kill a Man, Don Marquis' Warty Bliggens the Toad or D H Lawrence's provocative Intimates:

> Don't you care for my love? she said bitterly.
>
> I handed her the mirror, and said:
> Please address these questions to the proper person!
> Please make all requests to headquarters!
> In all matters of emotional importance
> please approach the supreme authority direct!
> So I handed her the mirror.
>
> And she would have broken it over my head,
> but she caught sight of her own reflection,
> and that held her spellbound for two seconds
> while I fled.

There are also countless short humorous poems that can make poetry teaching irresistible: Ogden Nash's limericks, Spike Milligan's nonsense rhymes, or Paul Dehn's Little Miss Muffet:

> Little Miss Muffet
> Crouched on a tuffet,
> Collecting her shell-shocked wits.
> There dropped (from a glider)
> An H-bomb beside her -
> Which frightened Miss Muffet to bits.

Poems such as these fulfil our third criterion for removing classroom barriers in that they are both modern and relevant. There is no shortage of accomplished modern poets if we scan the work of Ferlinghetti, Graves, Frost, Cummings, Gunn, Hughes, Scannell, Kirkup or McGough in addition to the writers previously mentioned.

Of course, whether the poem is modern or not is of less consequence than whether it speaks to us directly and has a universal message to convey. I think our fourth important task is to recognise the fundamental human concerns dealt with in poetry and to relate these closely to our students' lives. One way of doing this is to ask: what is the central idea or intention of the writer? Such a question immediately narrows the gap between the poem and the reader. Keats in his Ode on a Grecian Urn is, as we know, not primarily interested in an antique vase but in the fact that happiness is short-lived; Ted Hughes in Thistles merely uses the plant as a metaphor to expose the barbarism of war; Louis MacNeice in Prayer before Birth pleads for dignity and freedom in a potentially constricting world. We need to show our students (or better still, let them show us) that poems are living realities concerned with crucial issues such as the problem of war and poverty, the struggle for power, the possibility of an after-life, mankind's search for beauty and happiness, the frustrations of sex, love, marriage and death. These are the main concerns of our lives and those of our students, and we should be confronting such issues side by side, not as teacher and student, but as co-learners in a joint enterprise, as men and women struggling to cope with life through the medium of the written word.

Our final task then, after having selected meaningful poems, is to see that they are presented in a way that interests and involves the class. We can have them recorded, dramatised, read aloud, set to music, spoken as a dialogue, sung, presented by a group, illustrated with a film, synchronised with slides, or simply discussed objectively and related to life. We can arrange poetry workshops and Poetry and Folk Music Evenings, or invite

practising poets to come and share their experiences with a class. We can have students' own poetry printed in class newspapers and magazines, and display their work on notice-boards and panels. We can ask them to compose their own music and play it live as a background to a poem.

Any of these methods will work provided the teacher's intention is to make the poem an intellectual or emotional experience that is enjoyable and worthwhile. I don't think we need relinquish structure in our lessons and lesson programmes, nor need we abrogate our responsibilities as a sympathetic adviser and manager of a learning situation, but we do need to have the humility increasingly to step aside and let the students innovate and activate, so that poetry can become a rewarding experience instead of an ominous chore. The purpose of poetry at school ought to be to extend and enrich human experience. If we select interesting poems, teach them at the right level, and find imaginative ways of presenting them, our students should be as excited by poetry as by the scores in an international rugby test or the sound of Wilbur Smith's thunder.

(David Brindley's talk was followed by a demonstration of various classroom techniques using 15-year-old students, and a 10 minute film entitled Neighbours by Norman McLaren.)